DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 706 PS 012 426

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TITLE Children's Perceptions of the Sources of Self-Knowledge.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Cognitive Processes; Comprehension; Early Childhood Education; *Elementary School Students; Feedback; Individual Development; *Perception; Perspective Taking; *Preschool Children; Recall (Psychology); *Self Concept; Social Development; *Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS Self Observation; Social Comparison

ABSTRACT

Seventy preschoolers, first, and third graders (average ages of 4 1/2, 6 1/2 and 8 1/2 years, respectively) participated in interviews which used stories and pictures to assess their perceptions of the sources of self-knowledge (self-observation, social feedback, and social comparison). Assessments were made of level of role-taking and salience, comprehension, and ranking of importance of each source. Results indicated that role-taking level, salience (recall), and comprehension of each source increased with age. At all grade levels social feedback was the first source of self-knowledge recalled. No grade differences occurred for rankings of each source; children cited self-observation as most important most frequently, followed by feedback from others and social comparison. (Author/MP)

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Children's Perceptions of the Sources of Self-Knowledge

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Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, California, August 24-28, 1981

PS012426

We would like to thank Tegan Blackbird, Kelly Davies, Sheri Roth, Dan Rubanowitz, Cris Scaglione and Chris Woroniecki for their assistance in interviewing children; Renee Ewine and Cris Scaglione, who drew the stimulus pictures; Thomas V. Petros for his helpful critique; and the children, principals, staff and parents at Holy Family Elementary School, St. Mary's Elementary School, and United Day Nursery for their assistance and cooperation.

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Abstract

Preschoolers and first and third graders (average ages of 4½, 6½ and 8½ years, respectively) participated in an interview which used stories and pictures to assess their perceptions of the sources of self-knowledge (self-observation, social feedback, and social comparison). Assessments included level of role-taking and salience, comprehension and ranking of importance of each source. Role-taking level, salience (recall) and comprehension of each source increased with grade; children tended to name social feedback as the first source recalled, and pre-schoolers had more difficulty understanding social comparison than the other sources. There were no grade differences for rankings of each source; children cited self-observation as most importnat most frequently, followed by feedback from others and social comparison.

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Schoeneman (1981) examined undergraduates' reports about how they found out things about themselves for three sources of self-knowledge: self-observation (Bem, 1967; Duval & Wicklund, 1972), social feedback (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), and social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Subjects cited self-observation far more often than feedback and comparison, and their ratings of the importance of the three sources followed the same pattern. Among the issues arising from this investigation was the generality of the results to other age groups. We thus recruited preschoolers and first and third graders in an effort to explore age-related differences in reports about sources of self-knowledge.

Although there have been a number of developmental studies of single self-validation processes such as role-taking and social comparison (e.g., Selman & Byrne, 1974; Ruble et al, 1980), we are aware of no study of children's beliefs about how self-knowledge is accrued. Our aim was to assess salience, comprehension and perceived importance of the three sources. Since many theorists have viewed social feedback as crucial and pervasive in the genesis of the self (e.g., Bem, 1967; Mead, 1934), it seemed reasonable to expect feedback to be the most salient and highly regarded form of self-knowledge for children. However, the fact of the younger child's egocentricity, combined with our belief that "self-observation" would be the easiest concept to comprehend (and "social comparison" the most difficult) led to a refinement of the above hypothesis: in terms of salience and ranking, younger children should orient to self-observation and older children to feedback, while all children would find social comparison

difficult to understand, rendering it less salient and less preferred. We also included a quick measure of level of role-taking in order to note any covariation of this variable with reports of the sources of self-knowledge and with the expectation of a positive relationship between it and age and grade level.

Method

Seventy children (30 boys, 40 girls) from a nursery school and two parochial elementary schools were participants. The sample consisted of 23 preschoolers (age range of 3.8 to 5.0 years, mean = 4.4 years), 23 first graders (age range of 4.8 to 7.9 years, mean = 6.7 years), and 24 third graders (age range of 7.9 to 9.7 years, mean = 8.5 years). These subjects, all of whom participated with written parental permission, constituted nearly all of the children available at the preschool level and about half of the first and third graders. Elementary school subjects were selected randomly at one school and on the basis of availability (free time, work finished, etc.) at the other; participants from these two schools did not differ significantly on any of the measures taken in this research.

Children met for about one-half hour with one of three interview teams (an interviewer and a recorder) while at school. Participants first listened to three randomly-ordered stories in which a same-sexed child learned he/she was forgetful, tall or noisy via self-observation, feedback and comparison, presented in different orders within each story. Narratives were about 360 words in length and standard in format: each opened and closed with a statement of the relevant dimension (e.g., tall) and the idea that the hero found out about himself or herself on this dimension in three ways. The intervening three episodes set up a situation (e.g., Billy wants to reach a high object), described self-discovery via three sources (Billy can reach the window but his friend can't, Billy's friend tells him how tall he is, Billy notices how high he can reach), and reiterated the

nature of that discovery. After each story the interviewer asked how the hero found out he/she was forgetful, noisy or tall. The two types of measures of salience were the number of times a particular source was recalled across stories and the number of times each source was recalled first. Interviewers used prompts (e.g., "Anything else?") to elicit as many sources as the child could recall.

Participants then viewed three randomly-ordered sets of three line drawings involving same-sexed heroes who found out they were dirty, naughty (spilled milk) or neat (able to dress themselves correctly) via each source (again, presented in different orders for each behavior depicted). The "dirty" set, for instance, had a hero with smudged hands and clothes (1) looking at his/her dirty hand, (2) looking at a non-involved, slightly larger, clean child, and (3) listening to a pointing, slightly larger child. After presenting each picture with a brief description, the interviewer asked how the hero found out about the depicted behavior. Comprehension for each source of self-knowledge was the number of times the child correctly identified the process shown in each picture.

After each set of pictures (e.g., dirty child x three sources) the interviewer put the three drawings in front of the participant and asked "When you are (dirty, naughty, neat), what's the very best way for you to find it out?" Subjects pointed to their choice and again identified the process shown; only rankings involving correct identification were used in analyses. In order to represent a child's preferences of the three sources relative to one another, ranking was expressed in three ratios as follows: number of times a particular source was designated as "very best" divided by the total number of rankings made.

The final phase of the interview was a hide-the-penny game designed to assess the child's level of role-taking. This procedure and the ten resultant levels of role-taking are described in full by DeVries(1970). The children in this study

showed four levels: 6 and 7 (knowledge of social roles but not of different motivational perspectives), 8 (competitive attitude but no realization of other's strategies), 9 (realization of other's strategies but not of other's-taking-account-of-self's-strategies), and 10 (realizing that other is trying to take self's point of view).

In order to assess our experimenters' blindness to our predictions and to compare their expectations with obtained results, interviewers and recorders completed a questionnaire (after training but before meeting subjects) asking them to predict the study's findings. Their expectations were uniform and contrary to our predictions: they believed that social feedback would be most salient and highest ranked for all grade levels and that all sources would be comprehended by all subjects.

Results

All dependent variables were subjected to 2 x 3 (sex x grade) ANOVAs. We adopted a .01 significance level due to the large number of analyses conducted. There were no significant sex differences or sex x grade interactions; thus, only main effects for grade are reported. Sex x role-taking level analyses are not reported due to their similarity to those crossing grade and sex.

Salience (stories). Table 1 shows that with one exception, salience or recall of each source presented in the stories increased with grade level, contrary to our predictions of differential recall of sources across grades. Note, however, that at all three grade levels, feedback from others was the source most frequently recalled first. Since order of presentation of each source within each story was counterbalanced across stories, this may indicate that feedback was particularly salient to our subjects.

Insert Table 1 about here

Comprehension (pictures). Table 2 shows that comprehension of each source as depicted in line drawings also increased with grade level. Our prediction of different patterns of comprehension for each source of self-knowledge was thus unsupported. The youngest group did, however, average fewer comprehensions of social comparison than for the two other sources, thus partially supporting the contention that social comparison is the most difficult to grasp of the three sources.

Insert Table 2 about here

Ranking (pictures). There were no effects for grade level for any of the ranking variables, contrary to expectations. Means for the ranking ratios (possible range = 0 to 1, indicating low to high frequencies of selection of a source as "very best") for all participants were 0.61 for self-observation, 0.29 for feedback from others, and 0.09 for social comparison.

Role-taking, age and grade. Students' ages were significantly different across grade levels (see means in Method section), F (2,63) = 347.17, $p < .0001$. Role-taking level (assessed for 61 subjects) was correlated with age, r (59) = .59, $p < .0001$, and differed significantly for nursery schoolers (mean level = 7.3) vs. first and third graders (means = 9.0 and 9.5), F (2,56) = 17.75, $p < .0001$. Thus, our approximate measure of role-taking indicated that nursery schoolers were generally not seeing the world from another's standpoint, whereas first and especially third graders had progressed to this point and in some cases beyond, to the realization that others also engage in role-taking toward oneself.

Discussion

Perhaps the most interesting findings were that at all grade levels (1) social feedback was the most salient source of self-knowledge in the sense that it

was the source that was most often recalled first after the stories, and (2) self-observation was the most highly ranked self-validation process. The salience of feedback may be a reflection of children's social realities: evaluation form others is widely regarded as necessary to the development of the concept of self, and the classroom provides ample opportunity for direct and indirect feedback from teachers and peers. Another cause of this finding, which can neither be ruled out nor affirmed, concerns observer bias: interviewers and recorders expected feedback to be salient and could have subtly transmitted such expectations or presented stimuli in a biasing manner.

Observer effects are less plausible in considering the high ranking of self-observation, however, since neither the experimenters nor the authors predicted this finding. It is intriguing that the pattern and magnitudes of children's rankings of the three sources were quite similar to those of undergraduates. Schoeneman (1981) proposed three explanations for college students' preference for self-observation: students could be accurately reporting their true self-validation strategies; responses could reflect a social desirability motive, such that students cite the source of self-knowledge that would seem to put them in the best light; or, an information-processing bias is operating which causes introspecting subjects to orient to the source of self-knowledge which is the most salient or vivid (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). For the college sample, there is no evidence bearing on the former possibility (which goes against much of current theorizing in social psychology; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) and there is one study (Nash, 1981) which has failed to demonstrate the latter explanation in a replication of Schoeneman's (1981) assessment which manipulated states of self-awareness using a video camera or a mirror. There is, on the other hand, evidence for a self-presentation effect (Schoeneman, 1981), which is consistent with research

demonstrating a social norm which values internal explanations for behavior (such as self-observation) over accounts citing external influences (Jellison & Green, 1981).

A congruence in children's and young adults' behavior does not, of course, necessarily imply identical underlying mechanisms in the two cases. The reasons for children's preference for self-observation in estimates of importance remains unclear, but it is interesting to speculate that if children are operating in and influenced by a largely feedback-oriented or evaluative environment, their rating of self-observation represents some kind of early response bias. Whether this is a manifestation of an internality ethic or of some age-related or age-independent information-processing bias is a question for future consideration.

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Table 1:

Salience (Recall) of Sources of Self-Knowledge across Grade Levels

	N	1	3	F(2,64) =
no. times any source recalled (divided by three stories)	a 0.5	b 1.6	c 2.1	26.83 ($p < .0001$)
no. times self-observation recalled	a 0.4	b 1.5	b 1.8	9.12 ($p < .0003$)
no. times social feedback recalled	a 0.7	b 2.0	b 2.2	19.48 ($p < .0001$)
no. times social comparison recalled	a 0.3	b 1.4	c 2.2	17.40 ($p < .0001$)
no. times self-observation recalled first	0.2	0.5	0.5	1.76 (ns)
no. times social feedback recalled first	a 0.6	b 1.4	b 1.5	7.57 ($p < .002$)
no. times social comparison recalled first	a 0.2	a 0.5	b 0.9	6.71 ($p < .003$)

Note: possible range for all variables is 0-3.

N = nursery school, 1 = first grade, 3 = third grade

Noncommon superscripts indicate significant differences (Duncan's Multiple Range Test)

Table 2:

Comprehension of the Sources of Self-Knowledge across Grade Level

	N	1	3	F (2,64) =
number of times self-observation comprehended	1.9 [a]	2.7 [b]	2.8 [b]	9.74 ($p < .0002$)
number of times social feedback comprehended	1.8 [a]	2.9 [b]	3.0 [b]	17.04 ($p < .0001$)
number of times social comparison comprehended	0.9 [a]	2.6 [b]	2.8 [b]	34.85 ($p < .0001$)

Note: possible range for all variables is 0-3.

N = nursery school, 1 = first grade, 3 = third grade.

Noncommon superscripts indicate significant differences (Duncan's Multiple Range Test).